Splitting Adams

THE TROUBLED MISSION OF 'EX-GAY' MINISTRIES

Ella had been through one exorcism and was on the brink of another before she took her salvation into her own hands and decked the church counselor set on chasing out her "demon."

"She told me they had to get that homosexual demon out of me, and my life would be happy," Ella recalls.

by Cate Terwilliger

She had confessed same-sex attractions at 17, not long before her father suffered a series of heart attacks. When prayers for his healing failed, church members hinted darkly that Ella's "sin" was responsible.

"When my father died, I shared for a few years the guilt of his death," she recalls. "I thought I had killed him because of the sin of my homosexuality."

At 24, she agreed to the exorcism. When the laying on of hands and praying and crying failed, she agreed to try again a week later. After seven days of soul-searching, she found herself sitting in the church parking lot, drowning her humiliation and anger with a six-pack of beer.

Her spiritual journey changed dramatically a few minutes later, when the agitated Ella tried to leave and the counselor insisted she stay and complete the exorcism.

"I'm not a violent person, but get me drunk, get me scared, get me cornered, and I'll lay you out," Ella says. "I turned around and punched her lights out."

That was 24 years ago at the Security Assembly of God church, but it might be today, almost anywhere, as the Christian holy war over homosexuality continues. At one pole are fire-and-brimstone fundamentalists who condemn "sodomites" to hell. At the other are militant gays and lesbians who hold all organized religion in contempt.

In the middle are quiet legions of Christians — gay, straight and struggling — working in good faith to reconcile complex moral and spiritual issues. Many attend churches that affirm homosexuality as one of God's gifts. Others, like Ella, rediscover their faith through years of solitary study and self-reflection.

Thousands, unable to reconcile what they know of God with what they know of themselves, turn to Bible-based "ex-gay" ministries. There, they hope to overcome the "sin" of homosexuality and become part of what they are told is God's heterosexual plan.

"Most of the people in the ex-gay movement are very sweet-spirited: They're gentle and they're loving and they want to do what's right," says Mel White, a ghostwriter for fundamentalists Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and Billy Graham before coming out as gay.

"That makes them all the more dangerous to a vulnerable person. ... It's so much easier to deal with crooks and knaves than to deal with that sort of sincerity."

Two bibles at odds

As many as 200 ex-gay ministries are at work worldwide, according to California-based Exodus International, headquarters for the ex-gay movement since 1976. About 100, including three in the Denver area, operate in the United States alone. In addition, hundreds of mostly charismatic, fundamentalist and evangelical churches offer varying forms of support — from prayer and counseling to exorcism — to mostly male heterosexual-wannabes. (Lesbians are largely ignored in the ex-gay debate, as they are in broader discussions of homosexuality.)

Most ex-gay ministries claim affiliation with Exodus, use its literature, and share its basic beliefs, including:

- People are not born gay. Homosexuality is changeable through the redeeming power and unconditional love of Christ.
- Homosexuality results from deficits in a child's relationship with the same-sex parent and/or sexual abuse. It is a condition of retarded or impaired personal development; heterosexuality is the mature form.
- The Bible is the inspired word of God and the final authority for instruction in correct living. The Bible says homosexual behavior is a sin. Homosexual attraction is a temptation, but not a sin.

The mental health professions, however, rely on a different bible — the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Homosexuality has been missing from that volume since 1973, when the American Psychiatric Association declassified it as a mental disorder. Psychologists and social workers followed suit.

No single theory about the origin of sexual orientation has been confirmed, according to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. Researchers suspect a complex web of genetic, biological and environmental factors; in any case, orientation is no longer commonly considered to be a conscious choice.

Whether it's malleable is still under debate. Historically, clinical attempts to "convert" male homosexuals have included aversion therapy, electric shock, induced nausea and use of heterosexual pornography and prostitutes. Modern treatments, while less draconian, have gradually disappeared from the professional mainstream.

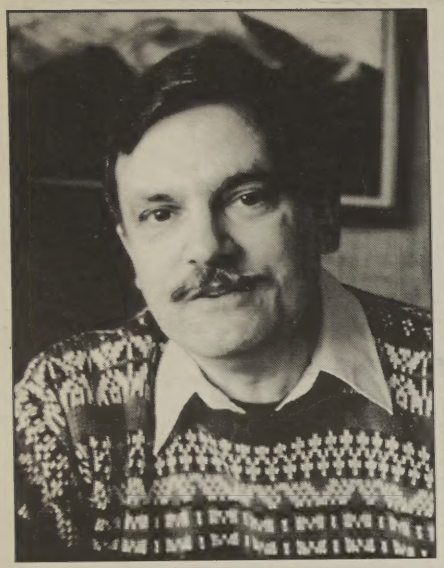
"The people who are doing this kind of therapy are generally not interested in scientific evaluation," said APA member and Columbia University professor Robert Spitzer. "They are doing maybe what clinicians of 20 to 30 years ago were doing."

Attempts to change sexual orientation are considered "ethically questionable by the professional psychological community," according to SIECUS.

Christian psychologist Joseph Nicolosi disagrees. His National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality in California, which boasts 500 members, believes that homosexuality is a treatable disorder.

Nicolosi, the 3-year-old organization's executive director, is the ex-gay movement's scientist of choice.

"Behind homosexual attraction is a



"There are many different kinds of sexual sin, of which homosexuality is one."

— Tony Marco

desire to meet very fundamental emotional needs that should have been filled in childhood," says Nicolosi, who works exclusively with gay men. "The homosexual feels ill at ease with other men, self-conscious, inferior, not good enough."

One of his curatives is getting gay men involved in competitive sports, where they can match themselves against other men and experience non-eroticized camaraderie. (By contrast, lesbian involvement in sports reflects "a rejection of the feminine role.")

Nicolosi describes his organization as "purely scientific" and avoids any formal affiliation with ex-gay ministries. Still, he slips easily into their language of "natural law" and "Judeo-Christian tradition."

Major religions and societies throughout time have given us "a clear, uniform understanding of masculinity and femininity and the definition of the family," Nicolosi says.

Homosexuality is a narcissistic "avoidance strategy. It's a stepping out of the natural role of a man in the family."

'One who draws alongside'

Often, the language of science — if used at all — paints a thin veneer over a Bible-based morality that declares homosexual behavior a sin and promotes traditional gender roles.

"All sex outside of marriage is sin, according to the Bible," says Anita Worthen, an administrator for New Hope Ministries in California, one of three residential ex-gay programs nationwide (the others are in Kansas and Tennessee). "It's very clear that man is created for woman, and woman is created for man."

The vast majority of ex-gay ministries are shoestring nonprofits that offer free, drop-in programs organized around support groups, Bible studies and, sometimes, one-on-one counseling. Residential programs are an extreme — and relatively expensive — option. New Hope charges $600 a month for its year-long program; afterward, unsteady graduates can live in a less expensive halfway house. The nation's oldest residential program, Love in Action, charges $12,000 for the first 10 months and $550 a month thereafter.

Residential programs typically incorporate Bible studies, support groups, counseling and strict nightly curfews. They offer extra help to men who have failed in conventional ex-gay ministries, "and particularly someone who is sexually addicted that has a hard time stopping the activity," says Tim Rymel, LIA's outreach director and a program graduate who recently married.

The choice to battle homosexuality must come from "a personal conviction that it's something you don't want for your life," he says. "It's not my job to make that judgment for that person."

Ex-gay ministries say they try to help people who seek them out, but avoid proselytizing. "You need to be offering support for the person's goals, but we don't try to set people's goals for them," says Mary Heathman, director of Colorado's largest ex-gay ministry, Where Grace Abounds, in Denver. "I'm not trying to get people to believe what we believe."

She likens her ministry to a Biblical word for the Holy Spirit — "paraclete," or "one who draws alongside."

"We see ourselves as people who will be available to give a presence in their lives of acceptance and grace and love and truth, and at the same time leave them free to make their own choices," Heathman says. "We consider ourselves successful if we have done that for people — whatever choices they make."

As a rule, ex-gay ministries eschew the condemning rhetoric that marks confrontations between some Christians and gays.

"I experienced Christians just like that," says Exodus spokesman John Paulk, a former drag queen who recalls riding in an open convertible during a 1985 gay pride parade. "I remember going through this line of Christians on the sides of the street, screaming and yelling at me. They were holding up signs saying 'God hates fags,' and 'Gays are going to hell.'

"I remember the overwhelming feeling was, who would want to serve a god like that? It pushed me away from God."

Ella, too, struggled with the message of homosexual damnation before breaking from her Security church. "They absolutely scared me to the point that I was ready to commit suicide," she says. "The only thing that saved me was that they taught me I'd go to hell if I committed suicide, too."

Most ex-gay ministries emphatically reject the idea that homosexuality is a particularly heinous sin deserving of particularly harsh judgment.

"There are many different kinds of sexual sin, of which homosexuality is one," says Tony Marco, who with wife Joyce operated DoveTail Ministries in Colorado Springs from 1991 to 1994. "But I would add this: Strictly heterosexual relationships can be every bit as 'sinful' and even more so than homosexual relationships."

"There's not some little hotter corner of hell for the homosexual."

— Anita Worthen

Anita Worthen agrees.

"There's not some little hotter corner of hell for the homosexual, " she says.

A questionable 'cure'

Obviously, not everyone feels that way. Marco put his ministry — the only one in Colorado Springs — on sabbatical under pressure from what he calls "the big religious right."

"There were some who felt that we were, as someone put it, too soft on homosexuals," Marco says. "Some of these folks seemed to feel that for political purposes, all gay people need to be demonized."

Marco believes that's a mistake. "Whereas conservative churches have said we hate the sin and love the sinner, they haven't sent out very many signals that there's any love of certain kinds of sinners in their midst," he says. "Frankly, I think conservative churches at large have ducked most of these issues because of a kind of self-delusion about their own purity."

Mel White, minister of justice for the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, a nationwide gay ministry, says savvy organizations like Springs-based Focus on the Family — which ignored repeated requests for an interview — use anti-gay rhetoric to increase their political power.

"Why has it become sin number one? Why has it become the number-one technique to raise money and mobilize volunteers?" White asks. "Why aren't they doing as much work to save marriages, and end racism and sexism? I think it's just that moment in time where homosexuality rings the bell."

Distancing themselves from the rhetoric of hard-liners is one of many difficulties facing ex-gay ministries. Steven, a Colorado Springs man who attended Desert Stream in Los Angeles, says many men in his support group became dangerously depressed.

"I saw a lot of people struggling with suicidal thoughts," he says. "They told us to ignore all our old friends. They were asking people to abandon the world that they knew, and their support structure. ...

"I think everybody saw there were no long-termers in the group," says Steven, who was asked to leave after questioning a Scriptural interpretation. "If there was all this healing, where were all the healed people? We didn't see it working."

Ex-gay ministries rarely keep statistics, relying instead on testimonials. Often, the success stories are group leaders or counselors. Heathman says four of five Where Grace Abounds staffers "came from a gay lifestyle." Married Exodus Executive Director Bob Davies had same-sex attractions but never acted on them; he considers himself an ex-gay. Paulk's wife is a former lesbian. Ministry literature often includes smiling portraits of weddings or families.

White, who married and had two children during his 30-year struggle with homosexuality, can't disguise his cynicism.

"Invariably, there will be church pastors or board members who are behind it, and they use these ex-gays as their model of conversion," he says. "Then these poor people have to get up there ... and do their 700 Club shtick. And then they go off a year later in the craziness and we catch them then. But by then, there's usually someone else to replace them."

Testimonials aside, most people who pass through ex-gay ministries leave as something other than happy heterosexuals. At best, most ministries — even those that offer intensive residential programs — claim a 30 percent "cure" rate.

Nicolosi's scientific approach doesn't fare much better. He says a third of his clients are "cured" after an average of two years of therapy; he does not track their progress after therapy ends. Another third are "significantly improved" according to Nicolosi, who says a large body of literature documenting the successful treatment of homosexuality has been "politically buried."

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"I remember going through this line of Christians on the sides of the street, screaming and yelling at me. They were holding up signs saying 'God hates fags,' and 'Gays are going to hell.'"

— John Paulk

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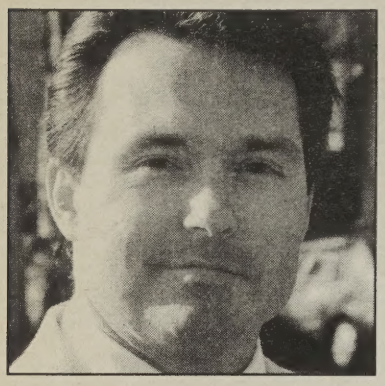
Keeping the Faith

'Ex-gay' minister Cook thrives amid damning allegations



"When homosexuals bring the accusation ... it has zero credibility."

— Kevin Tebedo

by Cate Terwilliger

The velvet-voiced Colin Cook has operated his one-man FaithQuest Colorado in Denver since 1993. A former Seventh-day Adventist minister, he was little known outside church and ex-gay circles until an October *Denver Post* article suggested Cook's well-documented struggle with his own homosexuality isn't over.

Cook, an impassioned and gifted speaker, lost his standing as a minister in 1974, after he was found having gay sex in his church. Twelve years later, Quest Learning Center, a "change ministry" he ran in Pennsylvania, collapsed after Cook admitted having sex with counselees. He had previously confessed similar indiscretions while visiting chapters of Homosexuals Anonymous, a program he helped found.

A slightly built Englishman with a gentle, sincere demeanor, Cook says he's been free of homosexual activity for 10 years. During presentations, he makes frequent reference to his sons and wife, although she reportedly left him more than a year ago.

Cook's public stance contrasts starkly with his alleged behavior behind closed doors. Material obtained by *The Independent* indicates Cook had phone sex — and more — with counselees as recently as this summer, when he was a featured speaker at Colorado for Family Values seminars.

The evidence, gleaned largely from a diary and tapes made by a young counselee dubbed "Eddy," was compiled by Ron Lawson, the gay Queen's College (New York) professor who exposed Cook's sexual liaisons in 1986.

According to the material, Cook's conversations with Eddy included detailed discussions of masturbation and descriptions of both men's penises. In an early session, Cook teaches Eddy how to "masturbate positively" — without fantasy: He is to imagine Jesus being "in the room with you giving you his love as he gives you an erection ..."

Cook also urges Eddy "to tell Jesus exactly what you sexually desire. Get by your bedside, naked, maybe with a hard-on. And say, Jesus I would like to suck a penis right now."

During face-to-face sessions, Cook often initiated five-minute, full-body "hugs," which gave both men erections. He also asked Eddy to bring his favorite gay pornographic magazine, and went through it page-by-page. After determining Eddy's favorite photo, Cook asked him to thank God for the man's handsome appearance. When Eddy balked, Cook prayed for both of them, thanking God for the model's "strong penis, his handsome thighs, his broad chest, his attractive pubic hair, his fleshy balls and (again) his firm erection."

Cook, who declined to be interviewed, has said that "explicitly healing conversations about sex" have been "misinterpreted" by counselees. In a November statement to supporters, he says homosexual activists are using the press "to intimidate me into silence."

His defenders make similar claims, and suggest that the tapes and transcripts either don't exist or have been doctored by activists out to get Cook. "I always consider the source," says former CFV director Kevin Tebedo, one of Cook's staunchest supporters. "When homosexuals bring the accusation ... it has zero credibility." Tebedo calls Cook's approach "the most functional" among ex-gay ministries with which he's familiar.

CFV director Will Perkins has refused to retract his organization's endorsement of Cook, or to investigate the allegations. He ignored an 11-page letter from Lawson graphically detailing Cook's behavior.

Rocky Mountain Family Council, which has promoted Cook's seminars, recently reiterated its "confidence in Colin's abilities."

DoveTail Ministries' Tony Marco, who has referred people to Cook and says he "possibly" would continue to do so, also is standing by him. "Some of the people involved in bringing the allegations are certainly not friends of the idea that change is possible for gay people," he says.

The fact that gay men are both the accusers and the alleged victims gives Cook protection he wouldn't otherwise have, says a man who was one of Cook's counselees — and victims — in Pennsylvania. "If he was a heterosexual counselor doing this to children or women, no one would give him the benefit of the doubt. People would be rallying to protect the victims, but there's no rallying now."

But the case has not escaped the concern of the Colorado State Grievance Board, which regulates psychotherapists. The board recently initiated an inquiry into Cook's counseling, says program assistant Karen Frazzini. He responded with a letter claiming a religious-ministry exemption from the board's jurisdiction.

Cook's case was assigned a priority-one status and forwarded to an investigator with the state department of regulatory agencies; it could be months before the matter is resolved.

Meanwhile, Cook says, his practice in the weeks following the *Post* article has "almost doubled." ☆

[Insert photo of supermodel eating bagel here.]

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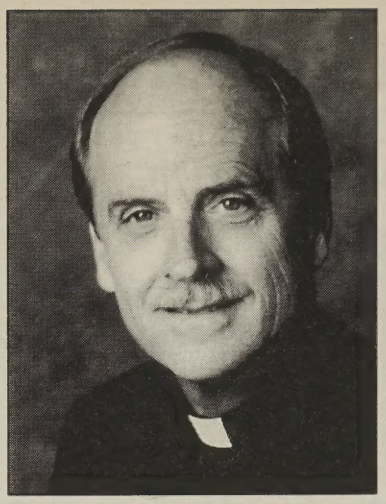

"Why has it become sin number one? Why has it become the number-one technique to raise money and mobilize volunteers? ... I think it's just that moment in time where homosexuality rings the bell."

— Mel White

The APA says it doesn't exist. So does Simon Rosser, an assistant professor in the University of Minnesota's program in human sexuality.

"There may be a whole world of ex-gays out there who are living in bliss," Rosser says. "I haven't seen them. I see the ones who end up suicidal, their careers ruined, their lives ruined."

Religious experiences appear to be effective, he says, because they "repress the homosexual inclination and try to maximize the heterosexual. The problem is what happens when you repress sexuality severely. ... It's going to come out some other way."

A loving middle ground

That observation has been applied to Colorado's best known ex-gay minister, Colin Cook, who has a long and troubled history of sexual involvement with men he counsels. An October *Denver Post* article suggests Cook has yet to achieve the recovery he holds out to others (see sidebar).

The bad publicity stings other Colorado ex-gay ministries. "We have a credibility problem anyway, so when a leader is found to be inappropriate, then the rest of us get the reputation," Heathman says. "It doesn't keep people from seeking help; as a matter of fact, publicity like that lets people know there's help available. ...

"But the people who are already in group, who have placed some confidence in a leader like that, can become confused and discouraged."

Numerous stories of gays falling in love at ex-gay ministries also hurt the cause. The best known is that of Exodus founders Michael Bussee and Gary Cooper, who left the ministry for each other in 1979.

"On the surface, Exodus ... seems nurturing and caring, and we had a fellowship with them," Bussee said in a 1990 interview with *The Advocate*. "The prejudice is hidden underneath. The people in Exodus looked at our straight marriages and our kids and said, 'God has raised up a mighty work,' and we believed it."

Ex-gay dropouts often find their way to Metropolitan Community Church, which has 250,000 members nationwide and 111 locally.

"We hold the same theological belief as the vast majority of Christian churches," says local pastor Nori Rost. "The main difference is that we believe being gay or lesbian isn't a sin, but just how we are."

Gays are increasingly welcome at many mainstream churches as well, including All Souls Unitarian and First Congregational, whose ministers have performed "holy union" ceremonies for gay and lesbian couples.

But change hasn't come quickly or easily, says First Congregational minister Jim White. "There's people who have left the church, withdrawn their pledges, and threaten to still if we make some affirmation of gay and lesbian persons."

He is skeptical of ex-gay ministries, calling them "an idea whose time has long since passed."

"If the American Psychiatric Association is no longer defining homosexuality as some sort of human aberration ... I think we ought to take some cues from what the best of scientific thought has said to us," White says.

"But my argument is not so much scientific or psychological as it is theological — namely that the whole message of Jesus Christ is one of love and acceptance of all human beings, and if they happen to have a different sexual orientation than me, well they're still loved and beautiful as they are. They don't need to change."

Ella, who recently celebrated her 11th anniversary with another woman, is "99 percent" satisfied that God created her as she is, although her fundamentalist upbringing is still with her. "There's always this fear of what I was taught when I was young: The big, mean God in the sky is going to get me," she says.

Today's ex-gay ministries hope to get their message across with love, not fear. "People want to classify us as gay-bashers and hatemongers, and they don't really know what goes on," Rymel says. "They don't really know the heart with which we speak."

Mel White agrees.

"These people are not evil, and when we demonize them we do wrong," he says. "They have been brainwashed as much as we have. They are victims of misinformation, too."

His advice to struggling gays? Walt Whitman's words: "Reexamine everything you've been taught. Discard everything that's an insult to your soul, and begin again."

Heathman makes a plea for a loving middle ground, where struggling Christians can safely wrestle with their sexuality and spirituality.

"These black and white party-line answers that you get from the extremes are just not the answer for people in conflict," she says. "They need more attention than that, and more respect for the diversity of the struggle." ☆